

Meet Gen Z - Your Future Leaders

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You've heard it enough in the last few years: The newest generation to enter the workforce (Gen Z; defined by Pew Research Center as those born between 1997 - 2012) is upon us and they have their own way of thinking and doing things. The good news is, this generation is motivated, driven, creative, pragmatic, tech-savvy, innovative, and entrepreneurial-minded. The bad news is, those words aren't often used to describe the AEC industry.

In order to better understand your company's future leaders, this article is intended to share a few of the "new rules for working" Gen Z has brought to the fore, to help you embrace their uniqueness and use it to advance the capabilities of your company.



Is This a Career?

The CMAA report, [The Workforce Recruitment and Retention Challenge](#) (2022), made us aware that many young people don't see construction as a career. This really is a marketing problem because the things that construction industry firms accomplish are the very things that Gen Z (as an aggregate) professes to care about: the environment, community, and sustainability. In your recruitment strategies and your social media (which many firms use as a recruitment tool) emphasize the positive impact you are making on the world. A hospital for the community, a LEED building's reduced impact on the environment, and so on.

Link to leadership: Young, tech-savvy future-leaders will help the industry to adapt and grow. We should celebrate individuals who want to positively impact the world they live in – and AEC builds that world.

Communication

There are three significant differences when it comes to communication and Gen Z.

First, they find texting to be the most-normal way of communicating. They will happily check in with their manager or take assignments via text; in fact, they would prefer it that way. Time to let your supervisors know that email is out and texting is in.

A sub-topic of texting is the use of abbreviations and/or emojis. A recent [Washington Post article](#) revealed that this generation uses emojis to represent thoughts and tone (as opposed to emphasizing a written thought) and finds the receipt of full sentences and periods (aka punctuation) to be "aggressive." If your organization uses Slack or a similar internal chat tool, the same texting rules apply.

A second significant communication preference to be aware of regarding Gen Z is that they want to be part of the conversation. They aren't content to simply accept an assignment from their leader. They will ask for the rationale behind the assignment. They will question if a different way of completing the assignment might be better. Older generation leaders in the field often find this to be frustrating because construction, in many ways, is a command-and-control structure.

Thirdly, this generation values feedback and believes it should be a two-way street, according to Alice Leung, a Gen Zer who worked in construction operations for over six years and is the author of "[Why I Left Construction.](#)"

Not only are frequent (not annual) performance conversations with one's supervisor expected, but Gen Z wants to feel comfortable providing feedback to their superiors as well. One of the more significant findings in the [Construction Industry Talent Retention Survey](#), which Ms. Leung helped spearhead, is the need for psychological safety in the industry. The youngest generation in the workforce wants to question and learn from more experienced colleagues without feeling as though they aren't welcome to do so.

Link to leadership: Since Gen Z will make up 30% of the workforce come 2030, it's important to understand and embrace their communication preferences because truly, each of these preferences leads back to doing the job better and encouraging this generation to feel committed to your organization.

Professional Development

CONTINUAL LEARNING

Gen Z embraces learning and being the best version of themselves they can be. They don't stop learning when they have a degree or a new credential. They want to constantly be advancing their career and they don't limit themselves to the technical side of the business. This can be both a boon and a bane. It's a boon if your organization is willing to provide professional development because you'll have a highly skilled group of up-and-coming leaders, but a bane if you are not willing to support their ambitions in this way because you risk losing them to an organization that does embrace continuous learning.

CAREER PATHS


Another aspect of professional development is its link to one's career. The generation prior, the Millennials, were often accused of wanting to move up the ladder or acquire titles without "earning" them. This generation is happy to work but wants to know where their career is headed. They won't stay on board not knowing where their loyalty and hard work will lead.

In terms of working with Gen Z this, in my opinion, is the most critical thing to get right. And it starts at the time of recruitment. If you show up at a recruitment event with a chart that demonstrates career growth over a period of time you will be the employer of choice at the event. Young people today do not simply want a job. They want job security and financial security. And a company that has planned that for them alleviates many of their fears.

Sargent Construction, a full-service contractor based in Old Town ME, has developed specific training and development pathways for young employees to become pipelayers, heavy equipment operators, and supervisors, through the Sargent Construction Academy. According to Peter Parizo, the company's Director of Workforce Development, this has resulted in 39% retention for the lifetime of the program and the organization, as a whole, grew over 10% in 2022 (without a full-time recruiter).

For more on career paths, see this June, 2022, [CMAA article](#).

Link to Leadership: Since this generation wants to continually learn, you can capitalize on fast-tracking their skills in order to move them into leadership roles earlier than the decade or more it normally takes in this industry (and since the Boomers are leaving the workforce by the millions, there is no time to waste).

Luckily, many of the obstacles to attracting and keeping the youngest generation in the workforce comes down to communication (or "re-branding," as Ms. Leung would say): let them know how they can advance their careers (both in terms of education and position), emphasize the impact your work has on the community and society at large, and include them in the conversation. They are curious, hard-working, and outspoken. They are ready to change how things are done in all sorts of industries and AEC can use that ambition as a "force for good." 



About the Author

Dr. Nanette Miner is a leadership development and workplace-learning strategy consultant. Through her firm, [The Training Doctor](#), she has revolutionized the way that individuals are prepared for leadership roles in their organizations. Rather than a chosen few, her process is aimed at ensuring everyone in the company has the skills and business acumen of a leader. This approach ensures both immediate and long-term return-on-investment (ROI) for an organization.

She has written articles for *Chief Learning Office magazine*, *Forbes*, and *MBA World* and is a frequent guest on workplace training and career podcasts and talk radio such as *Inc. Radio* and *America's Workforce Radio*.

Nanette regularly speaks at industry conferences and corporate learning events on how to integrate leadership capabilities throughout an organization. An author of eight books, her most recent is *Future-Proofing Your Organization*.

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